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A snapshot from the European educational landscape

Frank Boddin, Todd Graham, Laurie Schmitt and
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1. INTRODUCTION

The cannons roar as the celebration begins at Uppsala University. In Amsterdam and Ljubljana, department staff prepares the venue for the ensuing festivities. In Barcelona, the honoured students notify the restaurants one last time in preparation of the celebratory dinner that will soon follow. In Brussels and in Grenoble, eager students make some last minute preparations for each of their congratulatory parties. Throughout Europe, similar celebrations are prepared for and take place in a variety of forms in honour of those PhD students who have successfully completed their postgraduate studies at the third cycle of higher education by defending their dissertations. These celebrations, along with a variety of ceremonies, some more ritual than others, mark the transition of a PhD student from one phase of his or her academic life to another – to doctor, expert and scholar.

Even though the end result is the same, the paths leading to these celebrations vary immensely throughout the European Union. From financing, supervision and assessment, and the PhD programmes themselves, to the writing of the dissertation and PhD practices in general, PhD students throughout the European Union travel different paths and encounter different experiences along the way. In the United Kingdom (Scotland and England), for example, this path tends to be more structured and guided institutionally, while in France and Germany, the notion of ‘academic freedom’ and independence maps the way.

The development of a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a process promoted and stimulated by the European Union. The importance of a shared educational system across Europe has

become increasingly important, and as such, much emphasis has been placed at governmental level and within academic communities in general on the means of achieving this goal. It was the signing of the Bologna agreement in 1999 by 29 European ministers of education, which really launched these developments. The Bologna process stresses the need for European national higher education systems to become more comparable and compatible, and more interlinked and interdependent, while at the same time more competitive at the international level; and plans to achieve these objectives by 2010. Most importantly and also perhaps most challenging, the Bologna process aims to promote and establish a *'more complete and far-reaching Europe'* characterised by *'the necessary European dimensions in higher education'* including not only formalisation of educational practices, but also cultural practices such as *'shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space'* (excerpted from *The Bologna Declaration 1999*)¹.

Like the graduation ceremonies, studies have shown that there is a rich diversity between higher educational systems within universities across Europe and that many nations engage the aims of the Bologna process in varied and culturally specific ways.² Without examining the complexities of the Bologna process at policy or administrative levels, we ask: what does the European educational landscape look like for doctoral students today?

In order to answer this question, we present a snapshot of the European doctoral landscape based on the reflections of 40 doctoral students gathered from throughout the European Union for the ECREA doctoral summer school. One of this school's main objectives is to *'generate a wide picture of the international landscape of communication and media research'* (ECREA Young Scholars Network, 2007) while providing a platform for doctoral students to participate within their field, connect to diverse academic cultures³, and receive critical feedback on their individual work.

2. PHD PRACTICES: A SNAPSHOT FROM THE EUROPEAN DOCTORAL LANDSCAPE

During the summer school, Professor Kaarle Nordenstreng, from the University of Tampere, facilitated a workshop on the Bologna process and the European educational landscape. In this workshop, the present authors moderated focus groups with fellow PhD students. During these focus groups each student offered their perspectives on the practical, organisational and institutional aspects of what we have called 'doctoral

practices'. The focus groups concentrated on four major areas of doctoral practices: financing the doctoral studies, programme requirements, supervision and assessment, and the final stages of the dissertation.

The PhD practices explored during our focus groups revealed that mobility, diversity and formalisation characterise many European doctoral experiences. The focus groups showed, for example, a diverse array of PhD requirements rather than a standardised and comparable European educational system. In this sense, students did not refer to a 'European academic culture' as most are deeply socialised in their own academic cultures and do not know much about other academic environments abroad. Consequently, the student's own local academic culture still sets the dominant frame of reference, and there are many reasons for this, as the four sections below explain.

2.1. The financial dimension

There are many avenues to financing a PhD project within the European Union and the modes of financing varied considerably among the different participating countries in our focus groups. Apart from state funded allowances or bursaries (accredited by university departments or scientific organisations) and non-state funded private scholarships, students may also rely on personal funding, combining a full or part-time job with a PhD.

In the context of allowances provided by university departments, PhD students tend to have a staff position which includes (often but not always) both teaching and researching. Some universities provide pedagogical courses for PhD students. In many countries, teaching responsibilities are associated with a system of credits. In some countries, such as Sweden, there are systems in place that can extend students' research time based on how much extra teaching they undertake. Regarding the relationship between research and teaching activities, there are many differences between countries. The amount of time spent on teaching varies across countries, ranging from 15% in the Netherlands, to 70% in the UK. Regarding organisation and control of the balance between PhD student teaching and researching, there are differences in how these activities are formally regulated. In some countries, the official stipulated percentages are controlled (such as in the Anglo-American tradition, common in the Netherlands and Belgium), while in other countries the actual organisation of the relationship between teaching and research is more dependent on individual cases and is less formalised.

The focus groups also showed how the financial dimension tends to play a role in students' awareness of international educational contexts. Although students in many European countries may apply for extra allowances regarding travel, mobility and cultural exchange, such allowances are often granted by the university or state funded scientific organisations, which poses a problem for privately funded students. PhD students rely on personal funding in many countries, and in these cases, travelling is not a common or viable option. PhD students may have a job (or jobs) apart from his or her research activities and these kinds of socio-economic obligations may hinder students from major international activities.

Moreover, privately funded PhD students may have difficulties legitimising their research project in their home country in the first place. In Scandinavian countries, for example, PhD students relying on personal funding are likely to have difficulties getting accepted to a university department and/or finding a supervisor. On a more general level, during the process of a PhD, students are learning how to interact with, and manoeuvre within, the specific dynamics and practices of the institutional and social context within their own academic cultures. Generally, finding financial support for one's research activities is still a local, institutional issue, which is not often approached in relation to broader educational, international systems of support.

Mobility and knowledge exchange are valuable 'connecting practices' between students and across academic cultures, yet here again, the financial dimension plays a significant role. Although students in many European countries may apply for extra allowances for mobility and cultural exchange such as funding for travel expenses to and from conferences, in the majority of countries these allowances come with strings attached. First, location plays a role in students' capacity to acquire travel funding. For example, travel refunds are very often granted on a continental basis and 'intercontinental' travel is exceptional. Second, university budgets are often very limited and PhDs in 'hard sciences' tend to benefit more from these extra allowances, when compared with the humanities or social sciences.

2.2. Starting the PhD: Entrance requirements

As with financing, exploring European PhD entrance requirements reveals some coherence across countries with some similarities emerging between universities. At first glance, it seems possible to regulate the entrance requirements of doctoral programmes at a European level.

However, our focus groups portrayed a diverse array of PhD requirements rather than a standardised and comparable European educational system. The Bologna Process is still in process and under construction, and obviously a much longer period of time is needed for its realisation and completion.

In order to be admitted into a PhD programme, students are generally required in every country to successfully complete a Master's or a corresponding degree. Additionally, students must have a relevant project that is proposed in writing to the appropriate department and/or supervisor, where it is subject to approval. However, there are exceptions when it comes to the formalisation of entrance requirements. In Slovenia, for example, two systems exist. Students can apply during their Masters (thereby avoiding its completion) or they can apply after their Masters degree; where they are also required to write a proposal. Regarding their proposal, the Slovenian students spoke of not only writing a proposal but also of presenting it publicly to a jury. In certain countries, a number of valid credits (France, Germany and Norway) must be completed before students are eligible to begin their doctoral studies. Moreover in England, Slovenia, Poland and Scotland, there are English language requirements (the TOEFL examination or equivalent). Sometimes, the submission of a CV is necessary (Slovenia and UK) and sometimes an interview is required (UK and Netherlands) before students can be accepted into a doctoral programme. In Spain, students must submit a CV, a PhD project proposal, and successfully pass an interview. In Germany, the process is more informal as students only need to apply to doctoral programmes with a proposal accompanied by a supervisor's statement of support.

Finally, many differences appear where we do not expect them; indeed differences seem to be more prevalent between universities than between countries. Yet, this diversity appears to be a major element of the research landscape where particularities have to be shared. Nevertheless, to provide a clearer snapshot, it is important to include, not only entrance requirements, but also requirements during the PhD process, such as supervision and completion of the PhD.

2.3. During the PhD: Supervision and assessment

As was with both financing and entrance requirements, formal PhD supervision and assessment requirements varied considerably among the different participating countries in our focus groups. That being said, broad patterns between groups of countries did emerge. Based on stu-

dents' responses, we were able to group countries based on their level of formal supervision and assessment requirements into three groups ranging from low to high⁴. Formal requirements during the PhD process here, in terms of supervision and assessment, refer to three areas of the PhD process: supervision and progress reports; papers and presentations; and classes, seminars, and workshops.

The first group consisted of those countries with low levels of formal, institutional supervision and assessment requirements, which included: Germany, Finland, France and Norway. In terms of supervision and progress reports, some students spoke of formal and informal contracts. These contracts were usually between student, supervisor and department, and they laid out what was to be expected from all parties during the 3-5 year PhD process. Additionally, most students spoke of annual or biannual progress reports and mandatory monthly supervision meetings. When it comes to classes, seminars, and workshops, a few students spoke of courses and exams, and most spoke of having the option of participating in seminars and workshops when offered. However, for the most part, these were recommended rather than required.

The second group consisted of those countries with medium levels of formal, institutional supervision and assessment requirements, which included: Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Regarding supervision and progress report requirements, most students stressed annual or biannual progress reports and mandatory monthly supervision meetings. Additionally, students from the Netherlands spoke of a final year detailed schedule and progress report to be submitted to the department. In reference to papers and presentations, most were supposed to submit an extended proposal or article on their research after or close to the completion of their first year. Some students, i.e. from Sweden, spoke of having a 'mini-defence' or handing in a 'midterm dissertation', while a few spoke of being required to write yearly papers on their research. Interestingly, all students noted that they were encouraged, and some even required, by their supervisor and/or department to submit articles for publication. Finally, unlike the countries in the first group, some students spoke of being required to attend courses or seminars with accompanying exams/papers, while all students stated that they were encouraged to participate in workshops when offered. For example, in certain countries, it is necessary to earn credits through courses and seminars, such as in South Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.

The third and final group consisted of those countries with quite formal and institutionalised system of supervision and assessment, which

only included the United Kingdom (Scotland and England). Though the requirements varied slightly from university to university, universities in the UK tended to maintain high levels of formal, institutional supervision and assessment requirements. Regarding supervision and progress reports, students spoke of bi- and tri-annual progress reports, a specified number of monthly or yearly supervision hours, and logbooks to track those hours. Finally, most students spoke of being required to attend and participate in classes, seminars and workshops, which usually were accompanied by exams and/or papers, during their first two years.

Overall, it is interesting to note here that there appears to be a shift taking place. Students from Germany and Slovenia, for example, stressed that they have noticed slow institutional changes in the direction of higher levels of formal supervision and assessment requirements within their respective universities. There seems to be a shift away from a more independent and informal approach to doctoral supervision and assessment, towards a system that is highly monitored and formally regulated.

2.4. The final stages: Completing the PhD

Like the other dimensions of doctoral practices, there is considerable variation across countries regarding the dissertation. However, there are three points of comparison that are commonly found in the final stages of completing a doctorate in Europe. These include the doctoral work (the dissertation or the compilation of published peer reviewed articles), the committee or jury that assesses the student's final work, and finally, the way in which the student defends their final work, most often by way of a final oral exam.

Most students from our focus groups are required to produce a thesis or dissertation, based on original empirical and/or theoretical research that is 300 pages or more in length, with some exceptions. Although the traditional monograph still represents the norm, it is also possible to submit 2 – 5 peer reviewed published articles in lieu of a monograph in the Netherlands, Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and in some institutions in the UK. Slovenia also stands out because students who have entered the doctoral programme from their undergraduate programmes are required to publish 2 – 4 peer reviewed articles, rather than a dissertation, in order to get their doctoral degrees. In many ways, this marks an emerging trend as more and more departments and institutions are encouraging students to get their doctorate degrees 'by publication' or what students from the Netherlands call 'by compilation' instead of through a single, lengthy monograph. Spain is in some ways an exception here, as the

Autonomous University of Barcelona has just introduced an additional system to the traditional norm of the dissertation. In the newer system, doctoral candidates are part of a larger research group and their final dissertation is submitted as part of a series developed by students' research groups, rather than as an independent submission.

Another point of commonality across European universities, with the exception of some German universities, is that all doctoral candidates must have their PhD dissertations examined in some kind of formal defence or oral examination. This relates to the final two stages of completing a doctoral degree: first, the selection of the thesis committee or jury and second, the final defence.

For the first stage, European institutions generally create an expert committee or jury to examine the doctoral student work, although there is great variation in the ways that committees are organised, and how these committees examine the student work. In all countries, excluding Slovenia where students' thesis committees are appointed at the beginning of their PhDs, a special committee is formed specifically for the doctoral student's final defence. These committees or juries are composed of at least one internal examiner (from within the student's department or university) and at least one external examiner (from outside of the student's department or university). Often these committees include the student's supervisor with the exception of France, the Netherlands and the UK, where the supervisor attends but is generally not permitted to speak.

There is also a great deal of variation in how the final doctoral defence is organised, yet consistently, these defences are open to the public, with the exception of the UK and those universities in Germany where there is no final defence. In France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and some parts of Germany, the defence is largely ritualistic and by virtue of successfully reaching the final stage, doctoral candidates are generally confident that they will pass the defence. In Slovenia, the most important examination occurs during the second doctoral seminar, rather than the final defence. If students pass this stage, it is extremely likely that they will also pass the final doctoral seminar. However, this is not the case everywhere, because in Latvia, Estonia, the UK and Spain, the outcome of the final defence is mostly unknown until they are notified by their thesis committee at some point during the final oral exam.

3. CONCLUSION

Obviously we are looking at doctoral programmes from specific institutions and specific member countries from the perspective of specific doctoral students. Thus we do not suggest that this is the whole and representative picture. Nevertheless, all our testimonies revealed that mobility, diversity and formalisation characterise European doctoral experiences.

Our snapshot highlighted a great deal of cultural and professional diversity and strong differences in research and teaching traditions. Our snapshot also showed how differences in doctoral practices seem to be more prevalent between universities than between countries. Moreover, there were some significant changes highlighted by our focus groups. When it comes to supervision and assessment requirements, there is a shift away from a more flexible and open-ended PhD process towards a more institutionally formal and structured Anglo-Saxon approach. Another trend is that mobility is starting to become 'part of the doctoral agenda'. For example, students are aware of the possibility of teaching abroad, the expansion of joint study programmes and international organisations or initiatives that promote and stimulate mobility of research and researchers between universities and/or between different countries. Despite this awareness, however, students indicate that although mobility is important to them, their experiences of an 'international' dimension or sense of 'European' connectedness is still rather marginal.

If a discrepancy seems to exist between theory and practice, it is because the Bologna process is still largely a formal process undergoing construction and has yet to be fully realised. The Bologna process is about building a stronger European dimension within higher education while preserving diversities at the same time. Although international co-operation is growing and there are many efforts to improve the quality of education, student mobility and the recognition of qualifications, there is still work to be done to achieve the Bologna's main aims: to develop *European* educational practices, systems and curricula by 2010. Thus, in answer to our opening question, the focus groups highlighted trends around mobility and formalisation that are in line with the Bologna process; yet the diversity of doctoral experiences and lack of connectedness to 'Europe' suggest that our snapshot of the 'educational landscape' may be taken in Europe but does not fully reflect a *European* dimension within that landscape.

In closing, we argue that the summer school itself is a successful example of not only bridging differences and diversity across Europe, but also of developing a European doctoral landscape. It is successful because by bringing European researchers together and sharing the institutional, departmental and disciplinary differences within participants' own academic cultures, we were able to create at least a sense of broader European academic culture, within which we were all a part.

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NOTES

- ¹ The full text of the Bologna Declaration and other relevant materials are available on the official Bologna process site for 2007–2009 at <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>.
- ² For current reports on the Bologna process, see for example ESIB (2007); Reichart and Tauch (2003); and the *Future of European Universities* website (<http://www.europaeum.org/content/view/58/65/>).
- ³ Students participating in the Summer School focus groups came from a wide range of countries, institutions and departments. For simplicity, this article will refer to students' reflections, based on the country they are studying in rather than their origins.
- ⁴ It should be noted that in some countries, notably France and Germany, there were considerable differences between universities.